Markets Magazine

At Philippine Safari Park, Serengeti on South China Sea

William Mellor

December 9, 2013, 6:10 AM GMT+8
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-12-08/world-s-strangest-safari-serengeti-on-south-china-sea

It was as close to a Stanley-meets-Livingstone moment as a 21st-century traveler is likely to get. After a weeklong odyssey involving planes, ferries, buses and motorcycles, I peered through sheeting monsoonal rain at a mist-shrouded island.

A boatman materialized, beckoning toward his flimsy outrigger before paddling us across the mile-wide strait. As I trudged inland, dense foliage gave way to lightly wooded savanna. Two giraffes, handsome specimens almost three times my height, stood motionless as I passed between them. Some 30 zebras dotted the plain, impervious to the downpour, Bloomberg Pursuits will report in its Holiday 2013 issue. A herd of eland -- the largest species of antelope -- froze fleetingly and then pranced off in a conga line toward the island's hilly spine. Amid this profusion of African wildlife, a squat, weather-beaten figure emerged from a thatched hut. … Mr. Sariego, I presume?

Except my rendezvous with Froilan Sariego was half a world away from the Tanzania of Stanley and Livingstone. Rather, we were meeting in a remote outpost of the Philippines.

Back in 1976, this Southeast Asian nation's late dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, and his bejeweled, extravagantly shod wife, Imelda, decided to defy nature and

transform a cyclone-lashed island called Calauit into the Serengeti of the South China Sea. They evicted the 254 families who lived there and replaced them with 104 African animals captured in Kenya and shipped 9,700 kilometers (6,000 miles) on a latter-day Noah's ark.

Sariego, 59, was one of the young Filipinos hired from neighboring islands as novice game wardens for Calauit's new arrivals. Thirty-seven years later -- and more than a quarter century after the Marcoses were overthrown -- he's still there, doggedly minding some 100 descendants of that menagerie.

Super Typhoon Haiyan

Even when Super Typhoon Haiyan, one of the worst storms ever recorded, bore down on the island on Nov. 8, Sariego refused to abandon his post. As the storm rampaged across Calauit, tearing the nipa palm roof off his home and demolishing another 11 of 14 dwellings, Sariego, his wife, Edwina, and nine assistant wardens who had volunteered to stay with them, huddled together praying inside the island's sturdiest building -- a simple, cell-like administration block. Outside, terrified giraffes charged to and fro in the night, instinctively avoiding the deceptive shelter of seemingly sturdy trees that, once uprooted, were transformed into lethal weapons.

Sponsored Content
Intelligent and Flexible Cloud Solutions for a Changing World
Tencent Cloud

Unlike some nearby communities, Sariego and his team survived, albeit homeless and with varying degrees of trauma. Of the similarly traumatized animals, the game warden has accounted for 19 of the 21 giraffes and all the zebras, although he has yet to penetrate the island's wild interior to complete a full head count.

Unauthorized Visitors

For most of his time on Calauit, Sariego was under orders from successive Philippine governments to turn away unauthorized visitors. Since 2009, however, he's been granting access to any traveler intrepid enough to reach these parts. Not surprisingly given Calauit's isolation -- even before the super typhoon severed already primitive access routes -- this news has been taking a

while to filter out. When it does, he may find himself running the world's least likely eco-tourism attraction.

When I met Sariego in June during a monsoonal downpour that turned out to be a relatively mild precursor to Haiyan, his smile conveyed only delight at a foreign visitor.

"How did you find out about this place?" he asked in clear, softly spoken English. It's a question that would be posed repeatedly as I tracked down a colorful cast of characters -- including the Steel Butterfly herself, Imelda Marcos -- who have played leading roles in the Calauit saga.

Marcoses' Excesses

During their 20 years in power, the Marcoses embezzled $5 billion to $10 billion from their people, according to a joint United Nations and World Bank report. When they finally fled Manila's Malacanang Palace by helicopter in 1986, with irate hordes threatening to break down the gates, world headlines focused on the most visible symbols of that excess: 3,000 pairs of Imelda's shoes and a bulletproof bra that the incoming government of President Corazon Aquino put on public display.

Sponsored Content
At the Forefront of Globalization
HSBC

What the numerous chroniclers missed, and subsequent democratically elected governments failed to publicize, was an even more bizarre accessory -- the private zoo on 36-square-kilometer (14-square-mile) Calauit.

In separate interviews in June, Imelda and her son, Ferdinand Jr. (aka Bongbong) swore blind that the family's motive for commandeering an island two-thirds the size of Manhattan was to save endangered African species.

Procuring Animals

“My husband was passionate about nature,” the still-irrepressible Imelda, 84, said as uniformed servants offered croque-monsieurs in her lavishly appointed 34th-floor apartment in the heart of Makati City, Manila’s financial district.

That’s not entirely the recollection of Englishman Tony Parkinson, the wildlife catcher hired to procure the animals. While Parkinson agrees the dictator was a wildlife lover, he says the Marcoses and a business partner were planning a moneymaking safari park and tourism development. Others suspected darker motives.

“Some groups accused me of using it as my private hunting ground,” the Oxford- and Wharton-educated Bongbong, now 56 and a senator with his own presidential ambitions, said in his office overlooking Manila Bay. “Sure, I went hunting, but it was for wild boar that were eating the antelope young. It was never the exotics.”

Hotshot Trapper

Parkinson, now 77, lives with his Filipina partner in serene retirement on Romblon, a lush island in the Sibuyan Sea some 150 kilometers east of Calauit. Forty years ago, however, he was a hotshot big-game trapper in East Africa, with a client list that ranged from zoos and Hollywood movie studios to environmental groups desperate to relocate elephants, rhinos and other megafauna from conflict zones.

“Tony was a stellar animal catcher,” says Simon Stuart, chairman of the Species Survival Commission of the Geneva-based International Union for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN. “He got the contracts for the most difficult jobs in the world.”

In 1976, Parkinson landed an unlikely assignment, even by his standards. He says a mutual acquaintance told him that Ferdinand Marcos wanted to stock a Philippine island with imported animals. Parkinson flew to Manila, where he met the president and Luis Yulo, a Marcos crony who owned a sprawling cattle ranch on Busuanga, the largest island in the Calamian group, about 300 kilometers south of Manila and just across a narrow strait from Calauit.

Dictatorial Powers

Back then, Marcos ruled the former U.S. colony with impunity. A key American Cold War ally, he had assumed dictatorial powers by declaring martial law four years earlier. Now, according to Parkinson, Marcos and his pal Yulo wanted to put the animals, including carnivores, in a safari park on Busuanga, which today has a population of about 60,000.

“There was even talk of having lions there,” Parkinson recalled incredulously as we sipped calamansi juice on his veranda overlooking the blue waters of the Romblon Passage.

Instead, Parkinson recommended only nonpredators, such as foliage-nibbling giraffes, and advised that they be restricted to the less-populated Calauit. A deal was subsequently struck for Parkinson to catch 102 beasts, including giraffes, zebras, eland, impala, waterbuck, bushbuck, gazelles and topi. The price: $99,250. (Parkinson still has the invoice.)

Later that year, Marcos visited Nairobi, Kenya’s capital, to attend a session of the UN Conference on Trade and Development. There, at a meeting in a downtown hotel, Parkinson says Marcos handed him a $25,000 down payment in a suitcase stuffed with $100 bills.

Latter-Day Noah’s Ark

Parkinson duly captured the animals (with the approval of the Kenyan Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, no less), corralled them outside Nairobi and, in February 1977, herded them into enormous wooden crates and put them on a train bound for the port of Mombasa. There, they were loaded onto the open deck of the Don Salvador III, a cargo ship owned by Philippine sugar baron Roberto Benedicto, another Marcos crony.

Parkinson, who was told the ship was on its maiden voyage, accompanied the animals -- with the giraffes’ necks protruding through the slats -- on the three-week trip across the Indian Ocean, through the Strait of Malacca and over the South China Sea to Calauit.

That’s when things got even stranger, according to the eyewitness accounts of Parkinson and Sariego. With the Don Salvador unable to dock because of the

shallowness of the water, the animals were first offloaded onto military-style landing craft.

‘Like D-Day’

“It was like D-Day, only with animals,” Parkinson recalled.

Adding to the unreality of the scene, Ferdinand Marcos himself oversaw the operation from a helicopter hovering overhead. When the still-crated animals -- the number had increased to 104 after two births on board -- were finally deposited on Calauit’s palm-fringed beach, Marcos landed on the island and ceremonially released the first antelope.

“They named it Ferdinand,” Sariego said.

Marcos didn’t get to enjoy many more such Calauit photo ops. By the late 1970s, he was battling kidney disease and a rising tide of political opposition. In 1983, Benigno Aquino, an opposition leader he had previously jailed, was shot dead while being escorted by Marcos’s troops from a plane at Manila’s airport after returning from exile. Opposition forces united behind Aquino’s widow, Corazon, and in 1986, the pro-democracy uprising that popularized the term People Power forced the Marcoses into exile in Hawaii, where Ferdinand died three years later at 72.

Imelda’s Return

In 1991, Imelda was permitted to return to the Philippines, where she now serves in congress as a vocal opponent of current President Benigno Aquino III, son of Corazon and the assassinated Benigno.

During our interview in her Manila condominium, Imelda blithely denied knowledge of any wrongdoing. “There are no skeletons in Imelda’s closet -- only beautiful shoes,” she said with a beatific smile.

She was shod this day in simple black sandals beneath a sober black pantsuit; her surroundings, however, are grander. On the walls, a Picasso, a Pissarro and a

Grandma Moses jostle for space with a portrait of Imelda as an impossibly glamorous 36-year-old first lady.

There are also photos of her with U.S. Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan; with a cigar-chomping Fidel Castro driving her around Havana; and with a rapt Mao Zedong kissing her hand while simultaneously appearing to admire her chest.

“Her mere physical presence brought atrophied libidos out of long hibernation,” author James Hamilton-Paterson writes in 1998’s “America’s Boy: The Marcoses and the Philippines.”

Memories of Calauit

Although there are no mementos of Calauit in her condo, Imelda said she remembered it well, including her jaunt to Kenya with her husband for the UN conference. Ever the performer, the former beauty queen launched into an emotional anecdote to demonstrate her husband’s love of wildlife.

In 1939, the then-21-year-old Ferdinand Marcos first achieved notoriety when he was convicted of the shooting death of a politician who had defeated his father in a congressional election; Ferdinand spent a year in jail before being acquitted by an appellate court. In 1954, he married Imelda, who, on the way home from church each Sunday, would buy sparrows and parrots in cages to place in their garden.

“I loved to hear them sing and chatter,” she said. “But then they would disappear. Ferdinand used to set them free. He said, ‘I hope you don’t mind, but I can’t stand them being caged.’ He knew what it was like to be unjustly imprisoned.”

Kenyan Visit

According to Imelda’s version of events, the couple decided to acquire the Calauit menagerie while in Kenya.

“It was one of his obsessions that these animals should not become extinct,” Imelda said. “We looked at the map and thought, ‘My God, we are on the same line of latitude.’ And Calauit was barren and with only a few people.”

Whatever the Marcoses’ real motives, their transformation of Calauit left a dilemma for their successors. Perhaps embarrassed about what to do with the transplanted animals, and undoubtedly preoccupied with more pressing problems in a country in which 18 percent of the population still lives on less than $1.25 a day, government officials condemned the island to, at best, benign neglect.

Veterinarians stopped visiting, Sariego says. A detachment of marines that had helped protect against poachers was withdrawn. The team of game wardens, which Sariego was promoted to head in 1997, declined from 300 to 34. Back in Manila, rumors circulated among the few people who knew of the Calauit reserve’s existence that it had become a Jurassic Park of inbred and deformed beasts.

Sariego Steps Up

Those rumormongers hadn’t reckoned with Sariego and his team. Teaching themselves basic veterinary skills and keeping records on a manual typewriter by the flickering light of primitive oil lamps, the Filipino wardens helped their African charges adapt to the hostility of an archipelago that ranks No. 1 out of 195 nations in terms of economic exposure to natural hazards, according to Maplecroft, a Bath, U.K.-based research company.

Although the gazelles, impala, topi and waterbuck died out, the number of giraffes, zebras and eland actually increased. Calauit’s isolation also made it a haven for endangered indigenous wildlife such as the heavily hunted Calamian deer, the tiny mouse deer -- one of the world’s smallest hoofed animals -- and the Filipino bearcat.

Endangered Animals

Offshore, kaleidoscopic coral reefs have become a sanctuary for giant clams, green turtles and the rarely sighted dugong, or sea cow, an endangered marine

mammal that looks like a bloated dolphin but is more closely related to the elephant. Calauit's waters also teem with lapu-lapu, a fish so prized by Filipinos that it's named after the national hero who killed explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1521.

Finally, in 2009, Sariego's bosses in the local provincial government, based 300 kilometers away on the island of Palawan, decided they might just be sitting on an eco-tourism hot spot. They changed Calauit's official designation from "game preserve and wildlife sanctuary" to "safari park," allowing visitors to enter provided they first obtain a permit.

Their efforts won't be helped by the country's anemic tourism industry. While neighboring Thailand attracted 22 million travelers in 2012, the Philippines received just 4.3 million, according to official statistics from both countries. Reasons given for the low turnout range from security concerns to the frequently dysfunctional interisland transport, as well as climatic deterrents such as Haiyan.

Upward Trend

Yet the statistics Sariego compiles by lamplight on his battered typewriter have shown an upward trend -- from 50 visitors a month when Calauit first opened to outsiders in 2009 to 600 a month from January to May of this year, he says.

One thing working in Calauit's favor is its proximity to larger Busuanga, where the coral-encrusted wrecks of a dozen Japanese ships sunk by U.S. bombs during World War II have become magnets for divers from around the world. Unlike Calauit, Busuanga boasts an airport, improbably set in the middle of Yulo's former cattle ranch, which was seized by the government of Corazon Aquino in 1986. Although the terminal was damaged by Haiyan, along with much of the nearby town of Coron, the airstrip reopened soon after the typhoon.

Transportation Options

When planes are flying -- landing in Busuanga is allowed only during daylight hours, weather permitting -- it's possible to get from Manila to Calauit in a day. For visitors seeking to avoid the bone-jarring overland haul across Busuanga, however, there is a faster, tonier alternative. Dimakya Island, an hour by boat from Calauit when seas are calm, boasts an upmarket scuba-diving resort

called Club Paradise. Guests are met at Busuanga's Francisco B. Reyes Airport and, after an easy, half-hour drive, are whisked by speedboat to Dimakya's sandy shores in 60 minutes or less.

Since Calauit opened to tourists, Club Paradise has been able to make the unlikely addition of African-style wildlife safaris to its daily program of reef and wreck diving. Club Paradise temporarily closed after sustaining damage in the typhoon, but it is due to reopen in mid-December, according to management, which reported no casualties either to guests or staff.

For Sacramento, California–based computer programmer Teddy Antonio, 43, and his wife, Diosa, whom I meet during their visit to Calauit following their four-day diving jaunt to Busuanga, the island is an eye-opener.

"When we landed, it felt just like Africa," Diosa said as she offered a fistful of acacia leaves to a passing giraffe. "Our last holiday was to Hawaii, and it wasn't anything like as good."

Precarious Future

Still, Calauit's future was precarious even before the typhoon. When Ferdinand and Imelda decided to create their mini Serengeti, they forced the original inhabitants onto nearby islands. In 1986, just months after Marcos was overthrown, some of those islanders began to sneak back.

Today, about 1,000 of them occupy a village on the opposite side of the island from Sariego's camp. Now, just as in many parts of Africa, animals and humans tussle over land and food, with villagers accusing the giraffes, in particular, of trampling fences and eating crops; four years ago, one was speared to death. Meat from other, more appetizing Calauit animals has been spotted in market stalls, Sariego says, and domesticated dogs have been known to kill the small and vulnerable mouse deer.

Poaching Problem

In 2010, the Philippines National Commission on Indigenous Peoples awarded the returnees title to Calauit. And although the provincial government has invited them onto the committee that runs the safari park, “poaching will continue unabated,” Sariego predicts.

Even if poachers don’t kill off the transplanted wildlife, inbreeding likely will. Although they still appear healthy, the Calauit menagerie has now been reproducing within the same small gene pool for up to four generations, and Sariego says new breeding stock is urgently needed.

Capturing more African animals is out of the question these days, the IUCN’s Stuart says. And although the Philippines government continues to insist in its few published references to the island that Marcos imported the animals in response to an appeal by the IUCN to rescue endangered species, Stuart says there’s no record of such an appeal and that the translocation of animals beyond their natural range is against the organization’s long-standing policy.

‘Bonkers Project’

“It was a bonkers project,” Stuart said in a phone interview. “And if it’s now being promoted for eco-tourism, they should convey the message that it should never have happened in the first place.”

Stuart offers one ray of hope: that it might be possible to mate Calauit’s wildlife with African animals already in captivity in conventional zoos.

Back on the island, I stumbled through the darkness to the only guest accommodation, a Spartan open-air hut furnished with a bed frame, a mattress and a mosquito net. After falling asleep to the haunting, doglike barking of zebras, I woke to an extraordinary sight. All around me, zebras were grazing side by side with hundreds of Calamian deer, watched over by nearly two dozen giraffes, including two calves. Bonkers, for sure. Yet certainly a more complex and intriguing legacy than 3,000 pairs of shoes. **